

Testimony Presented to the Vermont House Education Committee, March 23, 2017

Dear Rep. Sharpe and members of the House Education Committee:

Thank you for the opportunity to provide testimony on proposed legislation concerning Vermont's universal prekindergarten system. I will offer some background and respond to several questions which I believe frame your discussion.

My background- While in Vermont, I served as a child care director and teacher, Head Start administrator, resource and referral center consultant for employer-supported child care, assistant director for the state migrant education program, taught at UVM and CCV in teacher prep, spent 20 years as Vermont Dept. of Education's early education coordinator. I currently serve as Senior Fellow with the National Institute for Early Education Research (NIEER) at Rutgers University and the Center on Enhancing Early Learning Outcomes (CEELO) providing technical assistance on early childhood education to state departments of education. I now split time between Vermont and Saint Simons Island, Georgia where I am currently watching the azaelas bloom.

While working at the Department of Education, I was deeply involved in the development of Vermont's UPK legislation and joint rulemaking process, feeling simultaneously like Einstein and Frankenstein.

The views expressed are my own as someone with 40 years' experience in early childhood education (ECE), much at the administrative level. I cannot comment on the identified need, rationale or politics of the current proposal, and I realize I run the risk of casting comments which others may take offense may sound like sour grapes of a former state employee. That said, I have the utmost admiration for all past and present architects and refiners of Vermont's universal pre-K effort.

1. Could you give the Committee a brief overview of the previous legislation that led to Act 166 including the desired outcomes for children and guiding principles that informed the approach for the service delivery system?

Please refer to Act 62, the original universal pre-K legislation.

<http://www.leg.state.Vermont.us/docs/legdoc.cfm?URL=/docs/2008/acts/ACT062.HTM>

A lot of puzzle pieces were coming together in the early 2000s. Many Vermont children were already spending significant time outside of their homes as parents worked. Too many kindergartners were arrived at school unprepared to take full advantage of program (ie., reading vs. never seeing a book) and kindergarten teachers had the hardest time of any grade level educator trying to contend with wide achievement and opportunities gaps. The science and math of early development and learning confirmed the positive impact of participation in high quality ECE, as well as the benefits of starting early. You may be familiar with the strong research base showing that every child can benefit (investment of \$1 yields more than \$2 of saving for universal programs and as high as \$17 for high risk children if they are enrolled in an excellent program with teachers possessing Master degrees. The

notion that Vermont would be well served by having an equitable pre-K system for all 4-year-olds was widely understood and embraced, and the addition of 3-year-olds came later.

Vermont had some of the nation's best programs in the country at that time, and public schools had already been engaged in early education since the 1980s. But Vermont was uneven in terms of early education and it showed up at kindergarten in September. The sentiment was that a zip code should not matter with a state program. Every town had a school and many had well-established, quality pre-K programs in their buildings or in partnership with Head Start and child care. There was a desire to allow communities to take advantage of what they had and expand the opportunity to develop public-private partnership so space would not be a barrier. Care was taken to prevent undue competition and put additional pressure on what was already a fragile child care system where turnover and closures historically remain high (it is worth noting that FreedomWorks, an organization funded by out of state interests warned of mass private program closures, something that never materialized). Recognizing that one size did not fit all communities or families, flexibility for parental choice was included so supplemental needs could be addressed (ie., full day service for working families, parents wanting part-day programs in schools with older siblings).

Act 62 was based on several premises- collaborative development and implementation on state and local levels; maximizing community-based systems (do no harm); equity (Brigham); ensuring quality; promoting child and family friendly practices that ultimately benefit children; establishing and maintaining fiscal and programmatic accountability; and establishing an institutionalized system not contingent on personalities or relationship. Trust and respect dominated every discussion and agreement.

Act 62 also built upon a 1999 (?) Memorandum of Agreement between the Department of Education (DOE) and the Agency of Human Services' (AHS) Department for Children and Families (DCF). DOE Commissioner Marc Hull and DCF Commissioner Bill Young stresses the importance of a single set of standards for programs to observe. It was based on the belief that a good program for children is a good program, regardless of whose sign is on the building; and children will be better off for having attended a quality program with all their peers when they enter kindergarten and continue on in school and community life.

2. Please explain the standing working relationships between AOE & AHS that influenced the co-lead agency approach Vermont has taken to date with the implementation of universal pre-k services.

At that time, AHS/DCF and DOE had a long-standing tradition of mutual respect and aligned contributions for the well-being of Vermont's youngest children. It began and ended at the top with a shared vision. There was excellent collaboration between state agencies due to committed leadership and effective working relationships of their staff. AHS Sect. Con Hogan and DOE Com. Rick Mills finished each other's statements during their Road Shows. If something was or is not happening, they assumed responsibility and took it upon themselves to resolve, something that continued through Coms. Cate and Dale. Multiple joint planning efforts resulted in great accomplishments and efficiencies. I am not in a position to say if this remains evident today but I've heard from some that those days have passed.

Other influences were at play as well. AHS and DOE, in a joint effort with UVM, created the Vermont Kindergarten Readiness Survey whose results pointed to wide disparities. At the time, a small grant program called the Early Education Initiative (EEI), begun with leadership from Senator Edgar May and others covered a fraction of the state's at-risk preschoolers and served as the seed for universal pre-K thinking. DOE Commissioners McNulty through Cate carried the torch with DCF Commissioners Young and Dale, and others at AHS such as Cheryl Mitchell, Kim Kesier, & KC Whitely played strong roles with the education community. The word "alignment" stands out for me.

All planning was conducted jointly and openly, and the State Board of Education was fully engaged throughout the process along with members from both sides of the aisle (Duncan Kilmartin, Don Collins, Kevin Mullin, Jim Condos, Hinda Miller, Alice Miller), eventually passing legislation which was signed by Gov. Douglas at Jody Marquis' child care program in Newport. The development process was very deliberate though at times painful, and interested parties such as the Vermont Superintendent and Principals Association and Vermont NEA were there as well as child care, Head Start, and Parent Child Centers. Advocates for the child care community were actively engaged and the Vermont Business Roundtable was there from day one. Everyone felt there was too much at stake to not get something rolling; ensuing technical revisions were anticipated and addressed subsequently.

Much work was based on seeing what was possible in Franklin county. Mark Sustic worked closely with multiple supervisory unions to maximize resources of the community to create a national model. Elsewhere, my first visit to Grand Isle Elementary School where a private provider operated a full-day/full-year childcare program in the school where certified teachers were present in the morning for at-risk children through EEI and special education students through Essential Early Education. Parents, Head Start, and child care subsidy covered costs associated with wrap-around services. Other models in Bennington, Middlebury, Montpelier, Brattleboro brought together schools, Head Start, child care, parent-child centers for high-quality ECE, fostered by excellent local working relationships. Good relationships didn't exist everywhere, however, and relationships aren't enough to assure statewide equity or long-term, sustained results.

There were also wide gaps of availability and deserts of quality. Sometimes programs were in operation, but they weren't where you'd want to send your grandchild to get a good early education. They met licensing requirements, but wouldn't necessarily meet standards of quality or research-based criteria for effective curriculum and pedagogy.

While there was more in common between AHS and AOE than separates them, there was also an unspoken difference of philosophy and orientation between education and social services, something which may be playing out to some extent now. Some programs are designed to serve as safety nets, others as trampolines. Child care is designed to support families first focusing on the child, education is designed to support children first. Still, I go back to the belief that a good program for children is a good program for children.

Knowing there are never enough resources to provide everything, funds were layered from multiple sources with the shared goal of providing each child with an opportunity to reach her potential

regardless of whose name was on the building. I guess this would be an example of “coopertition” (von Neumann and Morgenstern, 1944). Everyone ante’d up. No one got everything that was wanted or needed, and predictable disagreements largely have been over control and funding which ultimately goes back to local accountability. Fortunately or hopefully, they are not felt by the participating children.

3. Knowing the proposed changes to the co-lead agency structure in the current draft bill, how would they, in your opinion, impact the recipients of the services, i.e. children and families, as well as the Vermont early childhood system as a whole?

The intent behind the law was laudable. Implementation has been less than exemplary. The proposed legislation moves away from a more unified, equitable system. Separate and unequal in my opinion. I cannot comment on the reasons behind the proposed changes, and don’t pretend to be fully aware of the context, causes, or purported benefits. If someone had clearly stated the problem at hand, it would be easier for me to understand if this proposal is the proper and best solution to the problem. I suspect it can be traced back to failure of effective, good faith collaboration or even communication where children are put first, but as seen with implementation science, dips and bumps are inevitable. I go back to “a good EC program is a good EC program.”

I do not think under the current climate that co-lead authority is producing the best results or relationships, and this is trickling down to the local level. I think the proposals set up an unequal, bifurcated system made more difficult and unstable for parents to understand and access, and potentially serves as a disincentive for anyone wanting to engage in providing pre-K. If cost containment is a driving goal, perhaps it can be achieved in another way. If a qualified teacher shortage exists, there are other options which still assure children get what they deserve.

It appears to me that the onus of accountability falls on education, particularly on the local level, yet there are things out of their control in this legislation. Childcare is not accountable to the taxpayers in the same sense as education where outcomes and line item budgets are examined carefully and voted on locally. Overall, the language reads to me like a dramatic backing away from the original goal and commitment which put the children and families first, taxpayers second, programs and schools third as public service providers, and finally state agencies as public servant leaders (positions two and three could be argued as reversed).

Inevitably, with so many children coming from working parent households, I worry children once again will be bounced around from site to site where there is less assurance of continuity and parity of quality. I fear that means-testing runs counter to the stakeholders and Legislature’s intent which was to create a model similar to public school where all means all and the same rules apply to all. From everything we know about child development and learning, homogeneous settings are best, esp. when they mirror what children find when they enter public school. Consistency, access, quality, and accountability are paramount, and I think they will be jeopardized with a bifurcated system. There is likely a balancing act required on multiple levels, especially considering community differences where rural children and families may have the least options available. It’s also important to remember that pre-K came on the

heels of the Brigham, is something others may want to consider as this legislation is considered for action.

At risk of being totally off base and nonobjective, it appears there is a rift between state agencies of Education and Human Services on this matter which plays out, perhaps contentiously, in communities and under the Golden Dome. In my opinion, this proposed legislation supports parallel play, looks inefficient and inequitable from the outside, and may provide little remedy to achieving the original goal of supporting school readiness for every child.

4. How does the service delivery and administration approach Vermont is currently taking and would be taking under the proposed changes, align with what other states are doing as they move forward with universal pre-k ?

In terms of access, Vermont is a national leader (9 others- DC, GA, FL, IL, IA, NY, OK, WV, WI- have statewide UPK on books but only DC, FL and VERMONT come close to realization). When a state approaches 80% utilization of pre-K, it is pretty much considered full access. In terms of quality, Vermont consistently ranks among the bottom meeting 4 of 10 NIEER policy benchmarks for quality (e.g., different teaching requirements for public and nonpublic providers; not meeting effective monitoring criteria). Vermont shouldn't confuse licensing standards with high quality; they are minimum requirements for operation. This is one reason STARS was put into place as a voluntary program improvement effort linking higher levels of quality to increased state funding for childcare subsidy. STARS is a much better proxy, though it has its drawbacks (costs and time to program, not linked to impact, tilted toward childcare in its design). When it comes to pre-K, however, if child care licensing was taken out of the equation, school regulations for pre-K risk being inadequate or excessive, inappropriate, or even absent. This is why a single set of core standards applicable across all settings is essential for a statewide program.

Vermont has many things going for it. A reliable, stable (though not sufficient) funding system through school funding formula; the Vermont Early Learning Standards are excellent and comprehensive (not narrowly focused on future test items of literacy and math); a formative assessment system linked to the state longitudinal data system; an effective early identification system of children through its universal pre-K and allied child development and health network; ECE teacher licensure with alternative pathways; and a strong but aging professional workforce. One area for improvement points to better utilization of research-based curriculum and pedagogy. Look at Boston or New Jersey as examples.

Successful states have devoted adequate resources for personnel to oversee, support and monitor their initiatives. At the risk of sounding like an advocate, I remain very concerned that the Agency of Education and, to a lesser extent AHS, have been unable to adequately recruit, compensate, and retain knowledgeable staff to ensure communities have the necessary leadership and support to enact the educational quality and monitoring provisions of Acts 62 and now 166. Opportunities for effective teaming between AOE and AHS appear to be unrealized even with significant infusion of major federal grants such as Race to the Top Early Learning Challenge and Preschool Development Grant. Internal capacity of state agencies cannot be underestimated or neglected.

5. Are their states Vermont can learn from or best practices we should be considering before making significant changes to Act 166?

For more consolidated/coordinated functions within a single agency for birth – kindergarten, look at Georgia Dept. of Early Care and Learning (DECAL), Alabama Dept. of Early Childhood Education, Maryland Department of Education Office of Early Learning, Louisiana Department of Education Early Childhood Education Office, and Washington State’s Department of Early Learning. North Carolina divided early education for political reasons and may revert back to have greater continuity within Dept. of Public Instruction insofar as improving 3rd grade reading and math proficiency. If you look at Sec. 10(10) in Act 62, you’ll see this was on the agenda a decade ago but never went anywhere.

Pennsylvania improved inter-agency communication, coordination, and collaboration through the appointment of a shared agency Deputy Commissioner leading its Office of Child Development and Learning and having authority within both Departments of Education and Human Services. With a carefully selected person, this may be a strong recommendation for Vermont to consider.

As you determine the priority of empowering parents, districts, or private programs, you may be interested that “geographic portability” is not, to the best of my knowledge, addressed in very many places except Georgia where funds follow the child but are given to qualified classrooms (public and private) as a set amount for a fully enrolled class (prorated if less). Programs must remain within their allotted enrollment so not all children will necessarily have access.

States with exemplary gubernatorial leadership and strong state agency leadership can be found in Alabama, Michigan, Georgia, and West Virginia.

Attempts to strengthen regional partnerships by providing adequate funding and more local decision-making, including coordinated enrollment efforts can be found in North Carolina through its Smart Start Partnerships, Louisiana’s Early Childhood Regional Councils, and Florida. Even there, local control has become a very political issue with quality and access uneven.

As a result of Act 3, Louisiana consolidated its early education program functions under the Department of Education. Deputy Superintendent Jenna Conway blended multiple programs and funding streams, essentially creating a coordinated “any open door” enrollment through common intake and regional information, eligibility & application system which matched families to their highest preferences for qualified programs.

Means testing and universal pre-K are contradictory concepts; becomes a targeted program.

An excellent resource to compare state-funded pre-K programs is the [2015 NIEER State of Preschool Yearbook](#) which provides detailed information on 57 state-funded pre-K programs operating across 44 states and the District of Columbia. [Appendix A](#) is particularly informative with detailed comparisons of all state program features (look at page 189 for administrative authority).

OTHER POINTS

Research shows that a qualified teacher is the single most important variable in a child's development and learning, followed by the principal or director. A recent report from the National Academy of Science/Institute of Medicine on the early childhood workforce recommends a BA in ECE as a minimum but even that must be buttressed by coaching.

The itinerant teacher model has not always proven effective for improving program quality, modeling effective teaching practices, or establishing relationships with children and families. District responsibility to ensure special education services to eligible children spread across multiple programs is costly but offers other advantages.

School funding is important, stable means for pre-K education but not a substitute for an underfunded child care subsidy system; I recognize that some have viewed pre-K as a money grab for childcare which has perhaps also lowered some standards but created others where they were absent for public schools. Still, private programs were able to "game the market" forcing parents to pay for publicly-funded education.

Quality rating and improvement systems (QRIS) such as STARS did not have a research foundation at their inception and has been playing catch-up since. STARS was designed primarily as a child care system strategy in Vermont and should be re-examined independently to ensure a balanced model applicable for public schools and Head Start. It has come a long way but I personally am not confident that the band-widths between the number of STARS is equal, and a 3-STAR program may produce notably lower results than a 4- or 5-STAR program (some national studies are bearing this out).

SUMMARY

Despite the apparent critical tone at times, I want to commend the State of Vermont for taking its bold action on behalf of all Vermont children. Hard work has been required by many to make it work and, while not ideal, is it darned good. There are many unsung heroes, primarily the early educators who day in and day out give tirelessly to perfect their art and do right for children. Differences can be overcome and patience is needed, but it has to come from the very top while simultaneously holding people's feet to the fire. Improve what needs fixing while preserving the essentials.

Again, thank you for this opportunity.

Respectfully,

James H. Squires